

# *Reminiscences about Ernst H. Kantorowicz*

## Chapter I

### Relationship with Eka

The worth of these reminiscences as a testimonial to the character and temperament of Eka must needs be judged by how close I was to him personally. In this first chapter that case is argued in intellectual terms, featuring an unusually close teacher-student relationship based upon the convergence of his scholarly work with my doctoral dissertation. A dramatic element is imparted to that event in letters Eka wrote to me, which I discovered after writing this chapter and have hyperlinked to it. Not dealt with in this chapter, however, is the evidence found in those letters which attest to my belonging to the “family” relationship Eka developed with some of his former students; that will be dealt with in subsequent chapters.

It is convenient to relate my professional, scholarly relationship with Eka in four parts: (§1) four and a half years as his student in the University of California, Berkeley; (§2) two years when we were apart, he at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, I in Brussels and Paris doing research; (§3) two years as his assistant at the IAS; and (§4) eight years as close friends during the last years of his life. To this, however, there needs to be added (§5) an appendix, the forty-six years that have transpired since his demise, during which I have acted as agent of sorts in the publication of his works and disposition of his *Nachlass*.

#### §1. Berkeley (1947-51)

That I ever became Eka’s student at Berkeley was quite accidental. When I was accepted as a candidate for the doctorate at Berkeley, my major field was modern European History, foremostly France, and my minor fields were early modern Europe and American constitutional history. At that moment the department did not have a reformation specialist, but one of their medievalists had volunteered to teach the subject. For want of any other course being offered in early modern history, I signed up. At the end of that semester, I revised my PhD program drastically: early modern history (still mainly France) became my major field, medieval and ancient history my minor ones. Such was the impact on me of Eka’s lectures on the Reformation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Details of this event are given at the beginning of the next chapter, on Eka as Teacher.

[§1]

I chose not to major in medieval history because of my weak command of Latin, which I had studied for just one semester in high school.<sup>2</sup> That deficiency was made clear by Eka himself, when I sought to enter his seminar the next semester. He asked if I knew Latin, for the seminar would focus upon untranslated medieval texts, and when I told him of my brief study of the language ten years earlier he asked me to translate some sentences from a volume of Migne's *Patrologia* he had with him. I failed miserably, but that did not deter me. I took a summer course in intermediate Latin, and the following semester had the good fortune to take the seminar in historiography, required of all PhD candidates, which it was Eka's turn to teach. Early on I raised a question about the theory of a certain historian (a good friend of Eka's, though I didn't know that then) and he asked me to make a special report on that author's work at the next meeting. He was delighted by my report (more on that episode later on), and at semester's end he queried Michael Cherniavsky—long time student of Eka's with whom I had become friends—in this fashion: "...and what courses is Giesey planning to take next semester?" That, Michael told me, was Eka's way of asking me to join his seminar.

Eka's seminar were devoted to *explication de texte*, a different text every year. Michael Cherniavsky, Joseph Rubinstein, Robert Benson were always there in the four seminars I attended from the spring of 1948 through the fall of 1949, with one or two other students each semester. The *modus operandi* of Eka's seminar will be dealt with in the next chapter, devoted to the "Berkeley years", but one rather ordinary event that transpired in a meeting of the seminar in the autumn of 1949 was to have extraordinary consequences for my relationship with Eka.

The text being studied was the "Book of Ceremonies" of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus.<sup>3</sup> Its chapter on the imperial funeral was not very interesting, but Eka happened to recall an article on ancient imperial funerals which he thought might interest me. The author, Elias Bickermann, had added an "Exkursus" to his article in which he advanced the thesis that the French kings of Renaissance times had deliberately copied the practice of using an effigy of the ruler, as was done in the *ritus consecrationis* of the Roman emperors.<sup>4</sup> Eka asked me to read the article and report on it at the next meeting, which I did. Certain anomalies I discerned in Bickermann's account of the French practice prompted me to spend extra hours studying the sources more carefully, and the deeper I went into the problem the more convinced I

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that in the 1930s Latin was a required course for college-prep students in the public school system of Detroit, where I was born and raised.

<sup>3</sup> We read a Latin text, since none of us (save Eka, of course) knew Greek.

<sup>4</sup> Bickermann, "Die römische Kaiserapotheose," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, XXVII (1929), 1-34, the Excursus on pp. 32-34.

[§1]

became that the French use of an effigy at the royal funeral arose independently from Roman antecedents. I wrote up a summary of my findings, which Eka approved as a dissertation topic.

## §2. Brussels and Paris (1951-1953)

Before getting involved with the French royal funeral, as just related, I had applied for a Fulbright fellowship to work in Brussels on an entirely different dissertation topic. I got the grant, and the Professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles who was appointed as my mentor, Paul Bonenfant, graciously agreed to give me counsel and advice on my new topic. Very helpful, too, was the presence in Belgium of Gordon Griffiths, my dissertation advisor since Eka left Cal, who was on sabbatical leave; I lived with the Griffiths family for my first few weeks in Brussels.<sup>5</sup>

In December, 1951, I got the [first letter](#) Eka had ever had occasion to write to me.<sup>6</sup> There is nothing in it about my progress on the dissertation, and in the [next letter](#) from him, in June of 1952, I appear to be already engaged on another project, the history of Louis XIV in medals, a subject Eka and I had talked about in times past. In actuality, I had not yet begun work on that project, but had invested some good hours in preparing the application. It was gratifying, then to have Eka write me that “the outline you wrote about your L.14 project was by far the best thing you did in years.” He was, however, still in the dark about progress on my dissertation, as the last paragraph of that letter shows when he asks me just when effigies began to be used, “Before Francis I or after? In other words, when did one begin to display, as it were, the ‘King’s two Bodies’ at the funerals?” I do believe this is the first time I ever saw, or heard, reference to the “king’s two bodies”, and it would be more than another year before I realized that that was the title of the book Eka was writing. In sum, as of June 1952, Eka and I were both poorly informed about the other’s work. It was clear from his letter, however, that my work was correlated with his in so far as the funeral effigy provided the king with a second body – whatever that meant. All that changed by the end of the year however, when, after reading a draft of my dissertation, Eka mailed me a long letter, dated [8 December 1952](#).

The praise Eka heaped upon my dissertation in that letter, to the point of taking it for granted that it would be published, elevated my status from apprentice to journeyman in the

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<sup>5</sup> The following spring I vacationed in France with Gordon and his family in France, and I remained close friends with Gordon for the following fifty years, until he died in 2001.

<sup>6</sup> It is the initial letter of the “[Eka to REG](#)” letters posted in the [Ekaica](#) section of my Web site. This one was typed up from Eka’s dictation by Michael Cherniavsky, Eka’s first assistant at the Institute for Advanced Study. Between them, Eka and Michael poked fun at a letter I had sent Eka.

[§2]

*métier* of scholarship. Even more notable than his praise of my work is Eka's declaration, not just once but in two separate passages, that he had not entertained great expectations about my career during the five years he had known me up to that point. He could just as well have declared that he always knew I had the ability to do good work and I had proved him right. To say the opposite of that, that he had doubted my capability and I had proved him wrong, put some onus upon him for not having been more perspicacious, but that would not bother Eka: to err is human, to cover it up a sign of weakness.

Early in the spring of 1953 Eka was able to offer me the position of assistant, which Michael and Bobby had held in turn. "I am very glad to 'collaborate' with you at the Institute and I am sure you will get very much out of that year" he wrote in April, specifying that "the chapter on *Dignitas quae non moritur* will be written under your tutorship."<sup>7</sup> He even arranged the routing of his visit to Europe that summer to include "one day in Paris to see and brief you...We will be able to discuss everything in Paris." What I recall most clearly about that meeting is Eka and I having *marcassin* at a certain Parisian restaurant. And then he rescheduled his return to the states on the *Nieuw Amsterdam* to match mine, so that we spent many hours together aboard ship.<sup>8</sup> As the ship with Eka and his new assistant neared New York City harbor, it passed the ship on which his former assistant, Bobby Benson, was leaving the states to do research in Germany.

### §3. Princeton (1953-1955)

An appropriate way to epitomize my time as Eka's assistant at the IAS is to quote his own estimate of the prospects of that relationship at its beginning, which is recorded in this passage from a letter he wrote to Maurice Bowra in November, 1953:<sup>9</sup>

My new assistant, Giesey, the boy I visited in Paris and friend of  
Gotlieb,<sup>10</sup> the AA lawyer of Christ Church, has developed [into] a  
real scholar during his two years in Paris, is very stimulating and

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<sup>7</sup> Letter of [29 April 1953](#)

<sup>8</sup> Letters of [7 June](#) and [25 July, 1953](#).

<sup>9</sup> Now in the Bowra archive; the text here relayed to me by Robert Lerner.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Gotlieb, with whom I had become friends in Berkeley; he studied law at Oxford and later on was Canadian ambassador to the United States.

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humanly charming... He is the funeral man, and it is only through him that I get to know how amazing funerals can be. I will probably get myself very soon a nice effigy to be placed on my hearse, which makes me look forward to that event with much greater pleasure than I ever expected .... This day may be approaching quickly because I have finally bought a car and an accident is bound to occur and prevent me from aging.

During my two years as Eka's assistant at the Institute for Advanced Study, he looked upon our relationship as that of collaborators in each other's work. My dissertation, which had proved the French royal funeral was an autonomous development with only later-day refinements taken from Roman imperial practice, was nothing of great historical importance; but when it was invested with the theory of the king's two bodies it became worthy of publication. Eka's work, of course, was an important contribution to political thought without the French royal funeral, but that ceremony imparted a real life dramatization to the narrative of what was otherwise a fanciful legal fiction. What is more, it extended the scope of the work to include France, which otherwise was barely represented. If my dissertation had happened to be written by some French scholar unknown to him, he could have cited it as his source in the traditional scholarly fashion. But in this instance the source was his own student's work, in a dissertation he himself had put the student on to. That made it appear that the student was a knowledgeable participant in the project of the *King's Two Bodies* from the beginning. As best as I can reconstruct the event, that explains why, when I became his assistant, Eka proposed that I be named on the title page as collaborator in the composition of the *King's Two Bodies*.

The term of my actual 'collaboration' with Eka did not last long. When he asked me to write the footnotes to his textual account of the French royal funeral, I could do no more than cite the primary sources in the same fashion I had done in the dissertation. I had no great fund of knowledge about the period I was dealing with, as did Eka, and so I could not make the kind of wonderfully rich enhancements of details that sets his footnotes apart from the ordinary.<sup>11</sup> After just a fortnight he told me, quite apologetically, that it wouldn't work – and I agreed almost thankfully. There was an ironical twist to this: not many months earlier he had declared, rather joyously, that his longtime pessimism about my scholarly ability had been overcome by my fine dissertation; now he had to confess the reverse (this time regretfully), that his optimism about my ability to perform on a level anywhere nearly as high as his own had been excessive.

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<sup>11</sup> See the laudation of the footnotes in *The King's Two Bodies* by Jean-Philippe Genet (translator of the work into French) in his article "Kantorowicz and the *King's Two Bodies*; A non-Contextual History", in *Ernst Kantorowicz*, edd. Robert L. Benson and Johannes Fried, (Stuttgart, 1997), 271.

[§3]

As I reflect upon that incident, I wonder whether even now, at the end of my career, I have the knowledge to compose footnotes equal to those in the *King's Two Bodies*, and my conclusion is still negative. It would have been a farce to have me listed as Eka's collaborator, but he went out of his way, in the Preface to *The King's Two Bodies*, to record how important my work had been for his:

As in all cases of a daily exchange of ideas and material, it would often be not at all easy to separate neatly the partners' contributions. The footnotes, however, will make it manifest how generously Dr. Giesey placed his own material—published as well as unpublished texts and photos—at the disposal of the author who had no qualms about using it, but remains for those sections a grateful debtor.

Eka made it very clear to his colleagues at the Institute that his new “assistant” was substantially assisting him in his scholarly work. My elevated professional status induced social promotion, and I was regularly invited to social gatherings of the permanent faculty and visiting members. Abundant evidence of the important role I played in Eka's daily life when I was his assistant will be found in the chapter below on the “Princeton years”.

#### §4. In the Profession (1955-1963)

In the fifty letters he wrote me from 1955 to 1963, when I was launched in my teaching career, Eka treated me as a member of his fictive “family”. The core members of the clan, known to him already in Berkeley, were his first four assistants at the Institute, Michael Cherniavsky, Robert Benson, myself, and Margie Ševčenko (in that order), along with their spouses.<sup>12</sup> Eka sometimes used the term “family”, and we exchanged Christmas gifts with each other even though we might have limited personal contact. In his letters to me Eka relates his daily life in unusually detailed fashion, as well as his relations with true family members, especially his sister in Ohio. I never met her, but I did meet Eka's cousin Vera Peters (née Kantorowicz) and spend a few days with them vacationing at Lake Tahoe. In retrospect I think Eka assumed I would guess that his relationship with Vera was covertly intimate, but only after

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<sup>12</sup> Eka was fond of Michael's wife Lucy and Margie's husband Ihor, both known to him in Berkeley, but maintained only polite and respectful relations with the spouses of Bobby and me, whom he met later on.

[§4] he died did I learn from her that such had indeed been the case during all of Eka's years in America.<sup>13</sup>

### §5. Legacy

Not long before he died, Eka cooperated with Michael and me in fixing the content of a volume of reprints of his *Selected Studies*. The production of that book, published in 1965 in handsome form by virtue of an Institute subsidy – is recounted in the beginning of Chapter IV.

Michael and I had been bequeathed Eka's scholarly papers, but they devolved to me when Michael died in 1975. I deposited all but a few bits of that material in the Leo Baeck Institute in New York City in 1981, and in that year I also gave a talk on Eka at a small academic gathering.<sup>14</sup> That should have been the end of my public involvement in affairs having to do with Eka, but quite the opposite took place. *Ekamania* (as his niece Beate called it) manifested itself in the 1980s, signaled by a paperback edition of *The King's Two Bodies* in 1981 (after 24 years in hard covers), and translation of the work into five foreign languages starting in 1985. My involvement in translations of Eka's lesser works and participation in a symposium on him are tallied in Chapter IV below, but my greatest concern over the years, culminating in these Reminiscences, has been to counter foolish or even malicious biographical portrayals of him.

This concludes the resumé of my relationship to Eka, in person and with his legacy, over the span of almost sixty years. It has been told largely from an autobiographical point of view, designed to establish the context for the anecdotal reminiscences of Eka in chapters that follow. The two places he was professor, the University of California in Berkeley and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, are different in a significant way: the former has students (of which I was one), the latter not, but its faculty all have assistants (and I was Eka's). It is sensible, therefore, to treat Eka's years in Berkeley (1939-51) and those in Princeton (1951-63) in separate chapters.

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### Addenda and Corrigenda

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<sup>13</sup> More will be said about this in Chapter IV.

<sup>14</sup> Published later in [Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook](#), 30 (1985), 191-202, and posted here in Ekaica in the group of "Published works about Eka".